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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT AND PM IMPROVISE ON KOSOVO

Classified By: Ambassador Rodolphe M. Vallee for reason
1.4 b and d.

11. (C) Summary: Serbian Prime Minister Kostunica capitalized on missteps by Prime Minister Fico and President Gasparovic during his October 2 visit to Bratislava. Resulting media reports give the erroneous impression that Slovakia agrees Kosovo should remain part of Serbia. The MFA tried to set the record straight October 5 in a presentation to the diplomatic corps. MFA officials had prepared extensive materials and provided lengthy briefings to Fico, Gasparovic, and Parliamentary Speaker Pavol Paska. They are very frustrated with Kostunica and the media for ignoring the real message, and with the naivete of their own political leaders. The MFA quickly issued a press statement clarifying Slovakia's official position of full support for UN Special Envoy Ahtisaari and the Contact Group, and will be demarching Belgrade, Pristina, and European capitals to re-emphasize this position. While the immediate job is to repair the damage, the issue of ensuring the prime minister and foreign minister are both on message, at least on Slovakia's top foreign policy priorities, remains to be dealt with. End summary.

The MFA Prepared

12. (C) The October 2 visit of Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica to Slovakia backfired. The MFA had intended to deliver a tough message on Kosovo while providing some incentives for better Serbian cooperation in final status negotiations and with the ICTY, such as discussions on trade, visa liberalization, and support for eventual integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. Kubis, Political Director Miroslav Lajcak, and Director for the Balkans and CIS Stefan Rozkopal put extraordinary effort into preparing briefing papers and tutoring Slovakia's leaders to make sure everyone was on message. Lajcak told the Ambassador September 26 that he had spent an hour and a half with PM Robert Fico in New York during UNGA, and that FM Kubis spent two and a half hours with President Ivan Gasparovic on September 26 going over and over Slovakia's official policy. Lajcak's assessment at that time was that Kostunica would try to drive a wedge into the Slovak position, but that Slovak leaders would be well prepared to deliver the right message. He claimed that Prime Minister Fico, particularly, accepted the MFA's approach, trusted Kubis, and would follow Kubis' lead on foreign policy issues.

Gasparovic and Fico Screwed Up

13. (C) Nonetheless, both Gasparovic and Fico "improvised" during the visit, and Kostunica capitalized on their missteps. The resulting message in the press was that

Slovakia believes Kosovo must remain part of Serbia. Rozkopál confirmed to Pol-Econ Chief October 3 that MFA officials had provided extensive briefings and materials to Fico, Gasparovic, and Speaker of Parliament Pavol Paska. He said Paska made no mistakes. Kubis was open and tough. Gasparovic delivered the full set of talking points flawlessly. However, at the end of the meeting he added, "Personally, I'm not in favor of the splitting of Serbia." Although there was no press conference, Kostunica left the meeting and informed the traveling Serbian press that this was Slovakia's position; it became the headline of the trip. Rozkopál said that PM Fico was also mostly on message. Nonetheless, he made a mistake when he said he would like to support a solution to the Kosovo issue which could be reviewed in the future. This is absolutely against the Slovak "official" line, which considers a temporary solution unacceptable, and that the final status talks are final. Kubis has said as much to the Serbian leadership in Belgrade. Kostunica's spin on this was that Fico opposed Kosovo's independence. However, contrary to some press reports, Fico never stated that he opposed independence for Kosovo or that Kosovo should remain a part of Serbia.

Trying to Undo the Damage

14. (C) Rozkopál (please protect) blamed Fico's misstep on a "total lack of foreign policy experience." Kostunica is a clever politician, and Fico, Gasparovic, and the entire media succumbed to his manipulation of the message. Kubis, Lajčák, and Rozkopál met the afternoon of October 2 to strategize on how to repair the damage as much as possible. They issued a press release reiterating the basic policy points on Kosovo. (See para 5). They are sending a circular to EU partners, Belgrade, and Pristina clarifying Slovakia's position. According to Rozkopál, Lajčák was furious, and was going to use his participation in an October 3-4 meeting of new-EU member Political Directors and U.S. officials in Slovenia to explain to us and others what had happened.

15. (C) Informal Translation of the MFA Press Release:

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic, with regard to the visit of the Prime Minister of the Serbian Republic Vojislav Kostunica to Slovakia on October 2, 2006, and his discussions with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic Jan Kubis, confirms that in the matter of Kosovo, Slovakia supports the activity of UN Special Envoy M. Ahtisaari based on the guiding principles of the Contact Group. It is expected that M. Ahtisaari will present his report and recommendations for resolving the question of Kosovo in the coming weeks. After its publication, Slovakia will take a concrete position on its recommendations.

The highest constitutional officials of the Slovak Republic confirmed and conveyed this position to the Serbian side during discussions in Bratislava, during which they emphasized that the main goal of Slovakia's activities in the Western Balkans region is to achieve regional stability, prosperity, and the successful integration of the region and its countries into the EU. The resolution of the Kosovo question should support the achievement of this goal. The decisive conditions of the solution should allow a dignified and forward-looking life for all the residents of Kosovo.

Tarnished Relationship and Growing Pessimism

16. (C) MFA officials are very frustrated. They had been working hard within the EU to encourage greater engagement and cooperation with Serbia, and they got burned. Rozkopál said that Kostunica is absolutely immovable. After the approval of the new Serbian Constitution, he obviously felt very comfortable and self-confident, and the general mood of his Bratislava visit was very tough. When Rozkopál met with the Serbian Charge d'Affaires ahead of the visit, they discussed the whole agenda (trade, visas, etc). But it was obvious that Lajčák's prediction was right. Kostunica

arrived with one goal: to find a small mistake that he could use to his advantage. Slovak diplomats in Pristina, Rozkopal added, are really under the gun and Slovakia has lost credibility there.

¶7. (C) Even before Kostunica's visit, the MFA was growing increasingly pessimistic about the Serbian leadership's behavior. Lajcak told the Ambassador it was clear that Belgrade would not cooperate on Kosovo, so it was the ultimate responsibility of the international community and the Kosovars to "impose benefits" on Serbia. Unfortunately, the Kosovars were more interested in dictating the terms of the settlement, and getting as much as they could, than in taking Slovakia's advice to be generous for the sake of regional stability in the longer term. Lajcak said it was clear that Serbian elections would delay the process, and Belgrade's hope was that the over-confident Kosovars would do something stupid in the meantime and completely derail the talks. Lajcak also said he was "really disappointed" during his recent attempt to reinvigorate the NGO sector in Serbia.

Lajcak's Briefing to the Diplomatic Corps

¶8. (SBU) Lajcak went even further in an October 5 briefing to the Ambassadorial Corps. He reiterated the Slovak government's official position of full support for Ahtisaari and no public comment at the time on alternatives, particularly as they await Ahtisaari's plan.

¶9. (SBU) Lajcak gave a blunt readout on each of Kostunica's meetings, suggesting that the Prime Minister, the Speaker of Parliament, and the President had been on message, with the Serbian press and Kostunica twisting the truth. Kubis' meeting was most revealing. Kostunica was "harder than ever," buoyed by the Constitutional vote. Ahtisaari, according to Kostunica, is biased. He said the Serbs don't care about Ahtisaari; the Serbs don't need the Europeans to translate the Russians; they don't need another Sudetenland; partition would result in "many serious consequences"; and they have no interest in Partnership for Peace. On ICTY, Kostunica told Kubis, "I will not do this; ICTY is biased against Serbs; countries are playing games with Mladic as a tool." Kostunica would not even bring up the issue of an alternative.

¶10. (SBU) Lajcak told the Dip Corps that he was most distressed by the lack of mention by Kostunica of the Kosovar Serbs. He is convinced that the Serbs are putting their hopes on the Russian position. Lajcak noted that his government's position was at odds with the people of Slovakia; however, the GOS will not change its position. When asked by the Ambassador if the meeting produced any slivers of light, Lajcak said that the situation was "simply hopeless," that civil society is demoralized, that Tadic does not speak, that Serbs couldn't care less about the EU, that visa liberalization is impossible, and that Kostunica's sole goal was to go down as a national hero who fought to the bitter end. He said his contacts are warning that the OSCE may not be allowed to monitor the referendum, creating a non-transparent vote where the two million Kosovars eligible to vote could have their rights denied.

The Bottom Line

¶11. (C) The MFA assures us that Slovakia's position has not changed, despite the screaming headlines. Slovakia fully supports Ahtisaari and the contact group, and sees no alternative to independence for Kosovo. As Lajcak told the Ambassadors, this position isn't easy to sell to the Slovak public, which sees the Serbs as "Slavic brothers" and knows Albanians are active in organized crime rings in Slovakia. There is also sensitivity to the separation of territories by minorities, due to occasional calls for autonomy by radicals in Slovakia's ethnic Hungarian minority. Nonetheless, the MFA is committed to trying to help the process along.

¶12. (C) Comment: MFA officials publicly downplayed the mistakes by Fico and Gasparovic, saying that it was mostly Kostunica's fault for twisting the message. What remains unclear is what measures might be taken to prevent a similar situation in the future, so that the foreign minister and prime minister are not delivering conflicting policy messages on Slovakia's key priority regions. Fico himself told us in the past that he is more interested in domestic policy, and planned to leave foreign policy to the expert (Kubis). Nonetheless, he continues to jetset around to European capitals. At a recent hockey game with the Ambassador, Fico was clearly ill and exhausted, stopping play early and complaining to the Ambassador about the toll of all his foreign trips. He noted he was leaving at 5:00 a.m. the next day for Poland and could not reduce the number of foreign visits at this important time. At the moment, the MFA is focusing on cleaning up the current mess; we will then talk with them about how they plan to forestall future ones.

VALLEE